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SUBJECT: UNE CONGRESSMAN DISCUSSES INTERNAL PARTY DIVISIONS
AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

Classified By: Ambassador James M. Derham for reasons 1.4 (b&d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Influential UNE Congressman Manuel Baldizon told the Ambassador that the governing UNE's congressional bench is divided, and that he is the leader of the largest sub-group within the UNE bench. He said many UNE deputies resent President Colom and UNE President of Congress Eduardo Meyer, and that titular Bench Leader Mario Taracena also enjoys little internal support. Baldizon also discussed plans to reform the constitution to provide for a civilian defense minister and lay the groundwork for electoral reform. He was optimistic that the Colom Government will resolve the border dispute with Belize, but said the negotiation with Belize is not yet sufficiently advanced to warrant congressional action. End Summary.

Governing UNE's Bench Divided

¶2. (C) Ambassador and Pol/Econ Couns met February 11 with Congressmen Manuel Baldizon Mendez and Ricardo Villate Villatoro of the governing National Union of Hope (UNE). Baldizon is the Chairman of the powerful Finance Committee and has presidential aspirations for 2011. When asked whether press reports characterizing the 51-member UNE congressional bench as divided were true, Baldizon confirmed they were. Specifically, the bench is divided into three groups, Baldizon said: Seven legislators are loyal to First Lady Sandra de Colom, three or four are loyal to President Colom, and he termed a third group of approximately 37 "The Majority," which Baldizon asserted he controlled. Baldizon allowed that an additional one or two are loyal to UNE President of Congress Eduardo Meyer. He alluded to having used his chairmanship of the Finance Committee during the last Congress to earmark funds for members' home districts, thus winning their loyalty.

¶3. (C) Baldizon said many UNE deputies are angry at President Colom for having appointed relatively unknown departmental governors loyal to himself, rather than allowing deputies to have a say in the appointments for their respective departments. Colom designated Mario Taracena as UNE Bench Leader in recognition of his having led the UNE campaign's attacks on opposition candidate Otto Perez Molina, Baldizon said. However Taracena, whose mercurial temperament is well known, is widely disliked. Most UNE bench members also distrust UNE President of Congress Eduardo Meyer, Baldizon said, because he composed Congress' Board of Directors without seeking the party's views. Baldizon also discussed internal divisions within the center-right FRG and GANA parties, saying that most loyalties in the current

Congress are to individual leaders rather than to parties.

UNE Seeks to Reform Constitution

14. (C) Asked about his legislative priorities, Baldizon said that so far he has approximately 80 of 105 votes needed to reform the constitution. Specifically, the UNE seeks to: Provide for a civilian defense minister, rather than a military one, as the current constitution requires; reduce the number of deputies in Congress and do away with parties' national electoral lists; and allow the GOG to submit its territorial claim against Belize to the binding arbitration of the International Court of Justice. The UNE hopes to reduce the number of deputies from 158 to about 115, Baldizon said. Each voter would vote for 30 individual deputies, Qsaid. Each voter would vote for 30 individual deputies, rather than for parties' national lists with a similar number of candidates. When Ambassador questioned the advisability of asking each voter to pick 30 candidates, Baldizon responded that this was only one of a number of possible models.

Border Negotiation Not Ready for Congressional Action

15. (C) While Congress should proceed now with constitutional reforms on elections and allowing a civilian to serve as defense minister, he said congressional action to convoke a referendum submitting Guatemala's historical claim to Belizean territory to the International Court of Justice should wait. The two parties have not yet determined precisely on which elements of their territorial dispute they will ask the International Court of Justice to rule. Given the political sensitivity of the Belize issue, Congress should not act until the negotiations have advanced further, Baldizon asserted.

Comment

16. (C) Most informed observers' estimates of the true number of UNE deputies loyal to Baldizon are lower than the 37 he claimed, but there is no doubt that Baldizon is a force to be reckoned with in Congress. While at times paying lip service to President Colom's leadership of the UNE, Baldizon on this occasion and others made clear that he will jealously guard his role as congressional power-broker. For example, Baldizon was the UNE lead in the congressional revision of the 2008 budget last December. He claimed to be speaking for President-Elect Colom, but reportedly was the real decision-maker on the key budget questions.

17. (C) The UNE bench, which is the largest in Congress but is nonetheless a minority, is indeed divided. In addition to cobbling together support from opposition parties, President Colom will need to ensure that his own party's congressional bench stands behind him. It is worth noting, however, that many find the assertiveness of the 37 year-old Baldizon, who has already made his presidential ambitions known, to be off-putting. He too will need to be attentive to his base of support to ensure it remains firm.

Derham